

Essays on Southeast Asian and Australasian Literature

The Writer's Sense of the Past



Edited by
KIRPAL SINGH

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Editor's Note

In late October 1984 some 35 scholars and writers from Southeast Asia and Australasia met in a seminar at the National University of Singapore to discuss the topic "The Writer's Sense of the Past". This seminar had been organised as a continuation of a similar seminar held at the University of Western Australia, Perth, in late 1982. In Perth the theme had been "The Writer's Sense of the Contemporary".

Like the Perth seminar, the Singapore one was essentially small-scale, research oriented and invitational. The idea was to have academics and writers meet over a few days to discuss a theme in which they all had a passionate interest. The emphasis on research meant that all papers delivered at the seminar had been thought upon long and hard and were, therefore, the fruits of committed energy.

As such all the papers ought to have been published in this book. Unfortunately, as is often the case, this was not to be. Constraints of space and funds compelled selection, selection made extremely difficult by the high standard of all the papers. In order to reflect the variety and the diversity of views expressed, this selection was left to a Committee.

The Committee finished its task in early 1985 and the Singapore University Press was approached to bring out the selected papers in book form. This the Press graciously agreed to. From then on, it was the awkward process of getting all the selected papers together for final publication which kept the book from appearing as it ought to have at the end of 1985. In the meantime some of the papers which regrettably have not been selected have appeared in various journals.

Apologies for this extreme delay are in order. In order also is an expression of gratitude to all those who appear in this book, for their patience and understanding. Professors Edwin Thumboo, John Hay and Bruce Bennett were the moving forces behind both the Perth and the Singapore seminars and without their support and dedicated commitment both would not have been possible. The Asia Foundation (through whose generosity Professor Burton Raffel was brought out from the United States to deliver the key-note address), the National University of Singapore, the Australian and the New Zealand High Commissions in Singapore, and the Centre for Studies in Australian Literature at the University of Western Australia are all to be credited with helping to make the 1984 seminar successful and memorable.

Ms Lena Qua of the Singapore University Press has been painstakingly generous with her time and patience. The kind support of Ms Patricia Tay

ensured that the book would see the light of day, as did the enthusiasm and encouragement of Professor Edwin Thumboo. To all of them, and to the many others who go unrecorded but not unacknowledged, the Editor wishes to give his grateful thanks.

Kirpal Singh
July 1987

Introduction

Once
There was a quiet island,
With a name.
You must believe me
When I say that sunlight,
Impure but beautiful,
Broke upon the bay, silvered
The unrepentant, burning noon.
— Edwin Thumboo, “Island”

What is the writer’s sense of the past? How is it defined? By what means do we evaluate it? And in what way is the writer’s sense of the past definitive, if at all?

There are no easy answers to any of these questions, questions explored at some length in the essays that follow. Let us, however, begin by examining Thumboo’s words from his impressive poem “Island” quoted above.

Little or no difficulty surrounds the opening three lines. We understand what Thumboo is saying and note that implicit in the statement is the sense that at present (“now”), in opposition to the past (“once”), the island is presumably, not quiet. Which, of course, would be true if the island in question is the island of Singapore. And we can assume, knowing Thumboo’s background and his poem, that the island referred to *is* Singapore, and, following that, that the Singapore of yesterday — the past — is markedly different from the Singapore of today. But how does Thumboo know that once the island was “quiet”? Is this deduced from history? And by “quiet” does he mean lacking in *human* activity? If we think of animals inhabiting the island prior to the coming of multitudes of people, may we not conjecture that it may not have been so quiet? Or is the poet assuming a common frame of reference, of thinking, of meaning, when he maintains that it was quiet in the past? Also, he tells us the island was “with a name”. But the name is not disclosed. Would this be “Tumasek” — the old name of Singapore? Or would it be Prameswara’s “Singapura”?

Riddled with an even greater difficulty is Thumboo’s injunction that “you *must* believe me”: why? and in what way? Why *must* we believe the writer and his sense of the past (or the present for that matter)? And if we have to believe, how should this belief manifest itself? These are not altogether simple questions as their language may lead us to believe. Is it mere poetic licence upon which the poet relies for credibility or does he, in fact, have access to knowledge, information which we do not? Or is it, very cleverly,

both? If we look more closely still, what is it that we are commanded to believe? Only that sunlight broke upon the bay and silvered the noon. This is where the poetry becomes purer and the sense, therefore, more elusive. Is the lesson, then, to know that when the writer *qua* writer (not as voice of history) talks, meanings shift uneasily from the specific to the general and back again to the specific? In other words, is Thumboo shifting away from a history lesson through poetry to an imaginative recapturing of setting in order to re-record the history? We know, let us say, about the island, but what do we, as readers, know of the “unrepentant, burning noon”? or the “*impure* sun”? “Unrepentant”, from whose point of view? And why “*impure*”? And since the poet has implicitly led us to compare past with present, are we to conclude that the present noon is repentant, not burning? And, the present sun pure? Or, to turn the tables, are these questions merely facetious?

André Gide is supposed to have said that history may be spoken of as fiction that did take place and fiction as history that did not. Intriguing. Or nonsensical. Nowadays we are less comfortable with any generalisation that attempts to make sense of the world. Latest fashions in literary criticism do not allow for substantiality, to the point where it can be taken for granted. Making clever play of words such as “history” (his/story) the critics would have us confront everything said by a writer with a great deal of suspicion and cynicism. Readers are not acolytes but persecutors and the word is definitely not with God. Given these unsettling forces of deconstruction and, in refined manner, intertextuality, which prompt probing of an order not usual in the past, what “authority” can (does) the writer exercise? And if the hitherto assumed authority is now become a rather nebulous condescension, by what virtue can the writer pretend to speak of the past in any way that is commonly acceptable or meaningful?

The larger question involved here — and one pertinent to our exploration of the writer’s sense of the past — is whether we are prepared to grant the writer a vision which transcends his private world and becomes meaningful to all? Thus, to take the Thumboo example again, are we to say that the poet’s apprehension of change as implied is purely personal or does it become universally acknowledged? And, to complicate matters, to what extent does either of these interpretations depend on the reader knowing more about Thumboo, about Singapore, and about the past in relation to both Thumboo and Singapore? These permutations merely indicate the complexity of the task at hand.

Aristotle claimed that literature was, ultimately, more profound than history. History dealt with particulars whereas literature (especially poetry, tragic drama) dealt with universals. More than that, the historian had to be fussy and exact about details, whereas the creative writer could dispense with these limitations. But when we are thinking of the writer’s sense of the past, is it not true to say that a purely imaginative reconstruction which bears very

minimally on the “actual past” will help us little in our understanding? Biographies and detailed scholarship tell us how faithful the great writers have been to their “reality”, reality constituted by past and present. History, however, is constantly changing, or, for those of us who live in a post-colonial situation (applicable nearly to all of Southeast Asia and Australasia), it is constantly being re-written. Different emphases bring forth different patterns of growth and development. In Singapore, for example, when I was in school, we learnt a lot about the role of the British in making Singapore what it was. Today the students learn a lot about the role of the Chinese, the Malays and the Indians in making Singapore what it is. Where does the truth lie? In both? Are the distortions merely qualifications, or are they counter-claims, exposures of lies?

I have, willy nilly, raised the problem of politics and ideology. Writers may or may not be partisan, or pretend to be. What is of concern is the meaning communicated to the reader. For instance, here is the Malaysian poet Ee Tiang Hong, commenting on a visible change in his childhood Malacca:

Gharry and palanquin are silent,
the narrow street describes
decades of ash and earth.

Here in the good old days
the *Babas* paved
a legend on the landscape,

and sang their part —
God save the King —
in trembling voices.
 (“Heeren Street”)

Does one have to be a *Baba* or a *Baba*-sympathiser to really understand? Or does the sense of loss come across without such a need? What if one were an ordinary Chinese who, in the days when the *Babas* were really powerful, when gharry and palanquin were very much a part of the landscape, was despised and looked down upon as *kasar*? And what of the Indians and the Malays who are, similarly, left out in this evocation of a rich cultural heritage? Ee is alert to all this, of course, and it is more than just irony which makes him write, later on in the poem,

We know,
we’ve learnt how history is created,
written, rewritten,
at times made to order,
the facts, the interpretation.
We’ve seen how human, how so fallible
the motive and the methodology.

Who are the “we” here? Fellow *Babas*? All who understand Ee’s situation and plight? (This understanding itself based upon an appreciation of historical facts and historical change!) Here is Ee with his sense of the past, a sense conditioned by deep feeling, feeling of loss, of uprootedness, of dislocation and exile. But how would someone who has no real knowledge of Malacca’s history understand all this? Is literature, therefore, particular or universal? The reader admits the emotional sway but does not fully comprehend the politics behind it.

In plural (multi-racial, etc.) societies the position of the writer in respect of his sense of the past becomes even more peculiar and problematical. Ee is an excellent case to illustrate this. *His* sense of the past is not the sense of the same past as recorded by someone like Muhammad Haji Salleh. Perceptions differ, and frequently the differences lie in differences of colour and creed. The world may become a global village but our grasp of this remains, often shaped by centuries of cultural outlook. Ee describes one kind of loss, let Muhammad describe another:

the blood in me has travelled so many centuries,
 flowed in unknown veins
 across swampy rivers and proud straits.
 the loins that have borne the beginnings that were me
 are so distant and divorced from these wild wild thoughts.
 the great-grandfather who walked in piety
 had filtered his purity into his dutch-hating son
 who walked with him and with god.
 they who have dominated their communities had traditions;
 purified the ancestral mud to clean cultivable earth
 and grew in its clutch children of faith and contentment.
 but the blood has collected corruptions in the new arteries
 torn from the river

(“blood”)

Here is the past/present from an essentially Malay perspective. The reader may gather that a connection with the islands of Indonesia is hinted at and that the “proud straits” are the Straits of Malacca. Here also is a sense of the past, colonialism pointed to in the “dutch-hating son”. If the *Babas* of Ee’s poem paved a legend on the landscape, the Malays of Muhammad’s poem “purified the ancestral mud to clean cultivable earth”. The same country, roughly the same past, but very differently sensed. Where do individual claims end and where does national consensus begin in such situations? And is not the sense of the past here very differently perceived than in a more homogeneous society? Obvious, but frequently overlooked in the simplifications of purely structural analyses where linkages are sought to heighten interpretation.

The writer’s sense of the past, then, becomes a matter of knowing the individual writer in terms of personal background and commitment. There

is also the added factor of time, of chronology. Thus time is significant in terms of whether or not the writer is young or old, as well as *when* the sense of the past is expressed. Writers may modify their own sense of the past as more information comes to light or as their own lives become directly associated with the past (this mainly in terms of their role and status — say as politicians, statesmen). Edwin Thumboo's sense of the past in Singapore will be different from, say, Angeline Yap's, a much younger writer and one for whom the past is not a "burden" the way it is for Thumboo.

I don't know ...
 Being Chinese doesn't turn me on,
 I'm Singaporean first, and then Straits-born
 And I'm rugged (I hope)
 Because I take the stairs
 Two at a time and at a run ...

And I use the overhead bridge
 Like every good Singaporean should.
 ("In Modern English: Song of a Singaporean, 1975")

Here there is almost no sense of the past, the present overwhelms. The tone, slightly cheeky, almost colloquial, suggests a casualness which the reader cannot but assume is a put-on. The non-Singaporean, as well as the Singaporean born at a different time, will just not know the allusion contained in the line "And I'm rugged". Angeline Yap's generation was told to be "rugged" by the Prime Minister and her phrase has, therefore, a very special meaning. This was Yap writing in 1975. In 1983, however, she was writing this:

and you, Singaporean
 what song have you to sing?
 born when the British Raj was still around
 and white brats strutted
 where they couldn't let you in;
 wide-eyed when the adults panicked —
 the foreign devils packed and left.
 soon after, grabbed from the classroom,
 dragged from the street,
 "curfew" your parents said;
 for you, a new kind of hide-and-seek.
 after a day launching paper boats,
 you watched the cheering crowds between cartoons
 then saw Prime Minister on the screen.
 you were surprised that he should cry
 and Father only said the man was sad
 when you asked him why.

("Song of a Singaporean: 1983")

More of the past here, and far more forthright than some of the older poets

who had written of colonial rule in Singapore. (More at least than those poems that have been published; I have it on Edwin Thumboo's authority that many of the poems written during British Rule in Singapore were very direct, almost revolutionary in spirit, but they were not published for obvious and good reasons. This adds yet a further complication: what about those writings which many people know about but which have not been formally published and made available to all?) Yap's reference is to Singapore's past and the gaining of Independence (when Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew shed tears on television — a scene extremely rare then as now) in 1965 with subtle hints ("curfew") of the racial riots in 1963–64. So there is a sense of the past, a sense which, in this case, many may not want to be reminded of. And this too is important: readers will *select* and remember those items which do not cause too much discomfiture. Some past is best forgotten.

So a change in chronology brings about a change in apprehension: the past does, indeed, become a "burden" for Angeline Yap too as she matures, grows older. There is anguish in the line "What song have you to sing?" — unlike Keats' "Autumn", Singapore, sadly, has no songs of her own yet and the recent past suddenly becomes paramount as having contributed directly to a blank in this respect. To merge the two Singapore poets, Thumboo does state in another of his poems that he has made new myths himself but these myths — like the "myth" of the Merlion which is the emblem of modern Singapore — are yet to be fully imbibed by the younger poets of Yap's generation. Criss-crossing, writers do, in the end, I think, transfer their sense of the past to their readers. As readers we would be the poorer if the writers did not do this. A national literature usually builds upon itself and this is what will be most interesting to watch in the developing literatures of many of the nations in Southeast Asia and Australasia. Even in countries like Australia and New Zealand which boast an older literary tradition than most of the countries around them — and I'm thinking here mainly in terms of literature in English — the writers continue modifying dynamically the sense of the past as they give more daring to their imaginations.

The writer *appropriates* the past. Unlike the historian, the past often becomes merely a vehicle for expressing a certain sensibility, a certain sensitivity. The more the imagination takes hold of the writer and his subject, the greater the appropriation of the past. In both *Voss* and *A Fringe of Leaves* Patrick White powerfully evokes certain definite, recognisable features of Australia's past, but he does so in a uniquely Whitean way and therefore even as he gives Australians their past, it is his past becoming theirs, not a past which is detached but a past which has been passionately handled by a forceful and creative writer. In some of his stories Frank Sargeson comes close to doing the same thing for the New Zealanders. Sometimes, as with the plays of Bruce Mason, the past is depicted with subtlety and finesse, but will become dated because it is too real, too true to life. The same might be

said to apply to that fine novel of Albert Wendt's *Sons For The Return Home* which creatively explores inter-cultural encounters, but the same cannot be said of Wendt's *Leaves of the Banyan Tree* where the past serves to point to a vision, a profound comment on matters of life and death. In Papua New Guinea Vincent Eri's novel, *The Crocodile*, staying close to reality, will face similar problems, as Russell Soaba's *Wanpis* will not because it uses the past to search deeply into the psyche of its protagonist. Nick Jocquin's novels evoke beautifully and passionately the Spanish past of the Philippines but the sense of the past there will continue to haunt the readers as it haunts the characters that move in his novels. And I could go on giving examples from other countries. But the point is, I think, sufficiently obvious by now.

Does the writer write *consciously* of his past and if he does is this *conscious* effort obtrusive? It is very hard to generalise and to speculate but even in the writing of historical fiction the writer takes liberties — sometimes without realising he is doing so — because the creative instinct overpowers verisimilitude. I believe a writer's sense of the past is not a sense which is easily fixed and easily understood, nor, by the same token, is it easily defined by the writer himself. In a curious way, that "sense" is not really sense (awareness) as it is the imaginative impingement or consciousness. Between the writer's sense of the past and the ever-present struggle to create, to offer fresh insights into human existence, to illuminate the dark regions of the human psyche, the writer has to choose for himself his mode of communication. Beyond personal biography, beyond even national history, the writer's sense of the past will offer readers not just an excursion into change and how change came about but into the future. The writer's sense of the past is, usually, a prelude to his sense of the future, of what will make humanity more human, existence more harmonious, life more lively. In recreating the past, the writer's best achievement is to help us bear the future and help our children's children realise dreams we will not.

Manifesto

Let us not babble about resuscitating
The dead — false ceremony,
Noisy make-believe;
Let us not extend the terms of the dying
More than is relevant
Or healthy to the living.

Sufficient that the past recurs
In the vein, images of overbearing walls,
Amorphous lights, and shapes
Haunting our dreams and fevers,
Without some feeble or artful mind

Invoking spirit and poltergeist
To terrorise our paths.

Let the dead lie dead,
The dying creatures of darkness
Quack, scratch, screech, and crawl
Back into *blukar*, jungle, crevices of rock,
Or squat in the shade of a stunted tree,
Blinded, when the all dark
Shattering cockcrow
Ushers our dawn.

— Ee Tiang Hong

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I

The Writer's Sense of the Past: The American Experience

BURTON RAFFEL

The first significant writer of imaginative prose, in the American tradition, is Washington Irving (1783–1859), followed closely by James Fenimore Cooper (1789–1851). The first truly professional poet is William Cullen Bryant (1794–1878), the first poets born and bred in America who can still today be read with pleasure are Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849) and Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1882), and the first unequivocally great American poet is Walt Whitman (1819–92).

As these dates plainly reveal, American prose literature makes its true beginning in the early decades of the nineteenth century, and American poetry is truly born with the publication in 1855 of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*. But the first settlement in what was then called the "New World" took place over two hundred years earlier, and almost a quarter of a century intervened between the declaration of American independence in 1776 and the publication of Irving's *Sketch Book* in 1819–20 and Cooper's *Precaution* in 1820 and *The Spy* in 1821. By 1800 there were over five million Americans (by 1855 the population was just under thirty million), the Louisiana Purchase of 1803 had doubled the country's land area to something over a million and a half square miles (just under half the country's present land area), there were approximately a thousand ships flying the American flag, roughly two-thirds of them being engaged in foreign trade and earning over a hundred million dollars a year in the process, there were just under a thousand post offices, and the federal government was taking in and spending just under eleven million dollars a year.

In short, there was a serious discrepancy between the growing size and importance of the United States of America and its literary achievement. And not only its literary achievement, but its achievement in all the arts — painting, sculpture, music, theatre, dance. Early in the second decade of the nineteenth century America was able to fight to a standstill the mighty British Empire, but it still had not produced a significant novel or poem. Nor did it produce deeply significant visual art or music for a long time to come, though to be sure there were stirrings and beginnings, thoroughly professional if not truly memorable painters like Benjamin West and John Stuart Copley, sculptors like Thomas Crawford and Augustus Saint-Gaudens, musicians like Arthur Foote.

This historical discrepancy is however more apparent than real. For one thing, for a very long time after it had become politically independent the United States tended to think of itself, in cultural terms, as little more than an extension of Europe, and in particular of Great Britain. Americans had come from all over the European map, not simply from England, but once in the United States they almost without exception spoke English, and read English, and wrote in English. They frequently thought of themselves as country cousins of those Englishmen who had had the luck to be born and then to live their lives in England proper. Americans were not only trained from infancy on British books, they were often inclined to think of themselves as dwelling in a kind of half-barbarian exile from their true homeland. Henry James' long residence in England, and his final indignant adoption of British citizenship, when America delayed its entry into World War One, is well known. But less well known is how widespread were feelings and attitudes very like James'. Writers then prominent but now deservedly forgotten, like Edmund Clarence Stedman and Louise Imogen Guiney, like Richard Watson Gilder and Thomas Bailey Aldrich, felt that English literary standards and English literary models, were the only ones that counted. (Guiney felt this so strongly that she not only spent much of her life editing the works of a series of minor British figures, but in mid-life pulled up stakes and lived her last two decades on English soil.) Stedman and Gilder and Aldrich were powerful editors as well as writers. They controlled a great deal of the serious literary press of the day, and their stifling and largely sterile orientation toward British writing and writers could not help but have a profound and damaging effect on the growth of native talent. As late as 1900, George Santayana, the Harvard philosopher and quondam poet, and junior colleague of William James, could write of Walt Whitman that "it is obvious that both his music and his philosophy are those of a barbarian, nay, almost of a savage".

Ezra Pound, born in 1885, and T.S. Eliot, born in 1888, both voted with their feet and left the United States for England. Eliot remained the rest of his life, Pound for a crucial dozen years from 1908–1920. Even after World War One the so-called "Lost Generation" of American writers — Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and F. Scott Fitzgerald most prominent among them — fled the United States for England and France, at critical moments in their lives. The pull of ancient and well-established *literary* homelands, even if not in fact a writer's actual homeland, is enormously powerful and enduring, and must plainly be taken into account in any balanced examination of a literary tradition, once subsidiary, which begins as colonial writing and only slowly, long years after formal political independence, begins to acquire truly independent status. (I might mention that I am myself an example of exactly such an influence, for both my parents were born in Europe, neither spoke English as a child, and yet I am in my own writing as American, and thus still as fixed in the long line of English-language writing that extends back through